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ENGLISH FOR PETER

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Some months ago there appeared in the *English Journal* an article which was very absorbing on account of Peter.¹ Its thesis was, if time has not warped my recollection, that we teachers of English should not spend time boosting the weak brothers and sisters of our work, but should devote ourselves to developing those of greater mental power. If we show the leaders of the flock the way, the rest of the sheep will be bound to come limping on behind, or else be devoured by the wolves. To apply this general statement concretely, does this mean that we should put our best efforts on the fortunate child who takes the classical or college-preparatory work, and let Peter, who stubs along in the commercial course, get what he can?

Most high schools seem to believe that this is true. In eight cases out of ten it is the experienced head of the department who works with the Senior college-preparatory pupils; the cleverest young teacher who drills the "classical" Freshmen. This situation has arisen partly because of the attitude of the secondary school toward the college. Knowing that their reputation is based largely on the standard of college-examination marks, high schools teach out of textbooks what colleges are likely to ask. Moreover, they are tempted to put their best teachers on this cramming job, in order that the word may go forth: "Everybody in X— High School got A in his college examinations. It is a fine school." Meantime, Peter, who is not going to college, is being taught by a Latin teacher who has not enough work or by an algebra teacher who wants a little variety in the day. Anybody can teach Peter English!

¹ Edmund K. Broadus, "The Case of John Smith," *English Journal*, November, 1915.

In the face of colleges, customs, and popular belief I am going to express the opinion that just "anybody" cannot teach Peter; that he, and not the fortunate child, should have the best teaching to be obtained. The policy of developing the leader is good, but to develop him at the expense of the led is neither wise nor profitable. Being in the vast majority and being prolific in direct ratio to their education, the led will be the parents of most of the next generation of American citizens. Now, under our American system, the children of the led of one generation mysteriously develop into the leaders of the next two or three. Is it wise to neglect the future for the present?

It is, furthermore, an economic waste to educate the fortunate child at the expense of Peter. The fortunate child does not need it so much; he breathes in at home a great deal of what we give him at school; he becomes educated whether we touch him or not. Peter, however, has crying need of help; he has no mental air at home; he cannot become educated without us.

Suppose there were two gardens, one of them fed by a spring, rich in bloom; the other, with dry, cracked soil, bearing a few limp plants. Would you turn your hose on the brown moist earth first, or would you say, "My goodness! That other garden needs watering!" Furthermore, if you found that roses would not grow in the second garden, would you not plant some other flower that was able to flourish in the less fertile soil? We are willing to take that trouble for flowers; why not for boys and girls?

Besides the college fetish perhaps another explanation of our neglect of Peter is the fact that nobody likes to teach commercial English. In fact, in some schools the confession, "I have commercials," is made sheepishly, as if one had been caught committing a petty crime. Even if we are not actually shamefaced, we admit that we do not enjoy our commercial classes, because from them we get less response. A question which brings eager discussion in a college class, in another is met with timid monosyllable or blank silence. And yet is not this all accounted for by the fact that in one class we are merely ripening seeds of thought planted by someone else, whereas in the other there are no seeds? Does that necessarily mean that no seeds will grow if we plant them?

To come down to literal English, can we not explain our dislike for, and neglect in, teaching English to the commercial child by the fact that we do not greatly consider the problem which he presents? Instead, we try to fit him into the courses laid down by the colleges, only slightly modifying them to meet his needs. Of course, in some schools we do have what is known as "commercial English," but I do not mean that kind. That interests itself purely with the mechanics of business. I refer to that English which will give Peter his attitude toward life and which he will use as his medium of exchange with the world.

Consider first the pit whence the commercial child is dug. The son of a fifteen-dollar-a-week father, he has multitudes of little brothers and sisters. "Peter," I said yesterday to one of my friends, "haven't you a little brother at home who would hear your spelling words for you?". "Lord! yes," returned Peter irreverently; "nine of 'em." I have a vivid picture of Peter's peaceful afternoon at home—a combination of turning the clothes wringer, reading Milton, studying spelling, and fishing the baby out of the gutter. How much Milton will the boy get? Moreover, even if he succeeds in going off to bed alone with his Milton and his cigarette, how much can a lad whose idea of nature is a public playground, of books, a pink and yellow supplement, enjoy of—

Mountains on whose barren breast
The laboring clouds do often rest,

or want to hear—

Sweetest Shakespeare, fancy's child
Warble his native wood notes wild.

Perhaps Peter is reading Webster, or Burke, or Emerson and is expected to be able to discuss several pages intelligently the next day. Consider the discussions which he hears in the kitchen, in the smoke of stubby tobacco pipes. The price of coal, the baseball pennant, the local scandal, the best murder of the headlines, and a dozen other topics, all reduced to the simple terms of the unthinking poor. How much interest can Peter develop in the abstract economic or ethical questions we are likely to ask him in

school? Besides that, look at Peter's bookshelf—if he has one. There are Horatio Alger, Oliver Optic, a coverless number of the *Cosmopolitan*, and possibly a Boy Scout book. Those are all his resources. There is much more pathos than humor in the story of the shop girl who was seeking a gift for a friend. The anecdote is old, but it illustrates my point. "Give her a book," said someone. "She has a book," returned the girl.

There can be but one result of Peter's lack of background, of opportunity to read, of chance to hear opinions—the lack of ideas in Peter's head. In spite of that, look at the books we make Peter read with the fortunate child. Every single one of them presupposes impressions and ideas which only the fortunate child has. Look over a list, and see if that is not so: *Silas Marner*, *The Lady of the Lake*, *She Stoops to Conquer*, "The Ancient Mariner," Burke, Carlyle's *Essay on Burns*, the *Idylls of the King*. These need for their understanding more background, more thinking, than Peter has ever conceived.

I think it was when Peter and I were reading the *Idylls* that I asked him to describe how Gareth looked as he left Camelot. "He looked all right," mumbled the boy. But I had my finger on the lines where "Gareth ere he parted flashed in arms," and I nagged. "Was he in knightly costume?" I hinted. "No'm," returned the blushing Peter, "he was in the clothes he wore in the daytime." Then it developed that the lad had never seen a picture of a knight in glistening armor. Was he to blame? After all, imagination is only a new combination of remembered impressions. Can you, for instance, imagine what a Piblogatelle looks like? Probably not; I have just invented it for the occasion. You have never seen a picture of it.

But, suppose we do become interested in Peter. What are we going to do for him? Just exactly what the fortunate child has had done for him in the past—give him work which will develop his fallow intelligence, and supply a series of impressions from which he can build his ideas. How? First of all, read to him. The fortunate child's mother has read to him since he was four; Peter's mother has no time to read. Secondly, get him to read to you. Peter is not used to the sound of his own voice in connected

discourse. Of course he has been taught to pronounce some consecutive words in the grammar school, but how many of your Peters can read enjoyably? Thirdly, show him pictures. Perhaps you think Sir Galahad is sentimental; Peter will see the knight, not the sentimentality. Buy postcards of the Holy Grail pictures, of Burns's country, of Kenilworth Castle, of Westminster Abbey. You are sick of picture postals, but Peter loves the pink and green colors on the back. Borrow pictures from the public library and the art museum, and spend a period talking with Peter about them. He will think he is getting out of a recitation, but you will know that he is storing up mental fuel in his poor little empty brain.

Besides these three things, for stimuli outside the classroom show Peter how to read the newspapers, even the red and black one in his father's overalls pocket. Although no newspaper is all bad, you will find invariably that Peter knows only the bad parts—the scareheads, the sporting exaggerations, the “comics.” Teach him to read the real news that every paper has; show him what and why an editorial is; get him to read the stock market and the advertisements. “But that isn't English,” somebody says. It's Peter's English. What is the earthly use of our feeding the boy on rich mental food which he cannot digest, when he does not know how to eat the simple diet he is going to live on most of his life? Some people even consider the reading of newspapers a pernicious habit. But if Peter does not read them he will read nothing else. Surely an intelligent perusal of the record of a nation's daily life must do something toward developing sane citizens.

Next, while Peter is looking at the newspaper through new eyes, we can introduce him to the magazines. I went through a class of thirty-five Peters not long ago, getting a list of the magazines they knew. Five of them had heard of the *Atlantic Monthly*, eleven knew that *Harper's Magazine* existed, thirty-five of them read habitually a snappy publication with some such title as *The Green Liar*. Now, magazines are accessible to the boy, and he is not afraid of them as he is of some books. Why should we not show him what magazines to read?

But, after all, from a schoolroom point of view, pictures, libraries, newspapers, and magazines are all more or less outside

resources. What about the inspiration which Peter is to get from books in the classroom? Here also, because we forget that he is different from the fortunate child, we make mistakes with the boy. The first of these is in the kind of books we make him read; the second, in the way we handle them.

Peter will have at most four years for cultural education before he goes out to earn his six dollars a week. Is it fair to make him spend months on intensive studies of college requirements, and send him out ignorant of the great movements of English literature in the past and the influencing forces of the present? I asked the lad a few questions the other day. We had been mutilating the "Grecian Urn" together, and we were both discouraged. Peter confided that Shakespeare died about fifty years ago, that Wordsworth was an American poet of the nineteenth century, that Kipling was either in jail now or else had been dead about fifty years. He further told a colleague of mine that Margaret Deland was the heroine of *The Scarlet Letter*. Who is going to set Peter right if we do not? Clearly, he should meet many books, not few; should see the sweep of literature, not its details; should know something of books of today, not merely of the past. Dickens, Thackeray, Tennyson, should be his friends, but he should not think of Masfield as a "country place in England," nor of Shaw as an interjection.

But suppose that the exigencies of a school system require that we use only the usual textbooks for the lad. Must we handle them for him just as the college demands for the fortunate child? We are tempted to, largely because we have acquired the habit of teaching a certain book a certain way in the years before there were so many Peters. Take *Macbeth*, however. Is it more important that the boy should be able to put every line into stumbling modern English, or that he should somehow feel the force of the human drama? Shakespeare wrote for the spoken word; why should we mull over the printed line? Shakespeare deals with universal experiences. Why not start with the ambitious embezzling cashier in his town?—the boy always knows one. After all, that cashier was not so different from *Macbeth*. Or, for another illustration, start on the ghost story in the *Green Liar*—

the witches really are more horrible, are they not? In every case, if Peter's imagination can be started burning with his own experience, it becomes easy to add fuel to it from Shakespeare. But we put out the flame if we fuddle him with nearsighted details; we never let him feel the warmth and comfort of the whole! In other words, when the boy is fussing mechanically over details, he is merely laboriously doing what he is told to do; when he begins to "see life whole," he begins to think. Then we can do no more for Peter.

In apparent contradiction to what I have been saying there is a side of Peter's training where he must put all his attention on details. So far, I have dealt with what might be termed the cultural phase, the part that tries to develop his soul, and show him that life may be big for any man. This other phase deals with Peter's pocketbook. As I have said before, when the boy enters high school there are only four years between him and the time when he must feed and clothe himself. Now Peter knows that situation, but because of his barren background he has no idea how to make himself better. He therefore depends on us to do it, for we are supposed to be experts. What are we doing? What can we do?

Let us see first of all what things Peter needs from a practical point of view. Above all things he must be careful in details, and we are not helping him. It seems strange that we should have so reversed ourselves in our work; on the cultural side, where we need sweep and range, we fuss over petty points; on the practical side, where we should have microscopic inspection, we utter glittering generalities.

Cannot Peter learn care in details at home? Look at him! See the gray grease on his suit, the grime under his fingernails, the empty buttonhole on his left shoe. Peter's mother does the washing for five fortunate families and sends five little Peters off to school every morning with at least the circle of their faces clean; the other three are too young to go. Clearly the mother has no time for details. So the boy has grown up with a habit of slicking over everything, of "gettin' by." We have a hard task to make him realize that homely details make perfection.

Again, the lad must learn mental independence. It seems curious that a child who has dodged automobiles since he was two, and perhaps been partially self-supporting since he was nine, should need to be taught such a thing. But yet, put at any mental task requiring independent thinking, he flounders, sputters, and drowns. Why should he know how to think for himself? His father never wrote five consecutive lines of thought in his life; his mother left school at the end of the sixth grade. Neither one of them ever performed a prolonged mental task of any kind.

Then we must face the question, "How can we possibly give Peter this accuracy in details and this mental independence in four short high-school years?" We can make only a beginning, starting with details.

Among these, the first to be considered are details of speech, because the boy's getting a job is very largely dependent on the kind of English he uses when he applies for it. Unless we help him, that English will be the language of his background, a combination of Gaelic or Yiddish or Swedish idioms with American gutter talk and baseball slang. He hears that for all but the few school hours of the day; he does not really know any other. To help the youngster, we must take care of the details of every thought he expresses in school. I believe that the very first thing he should be taught is to be sensitive about the words he mutilates; to watch for details. Peter enjoys it too, for he can see its practical value, and he loves to make blackboard lists of "s'af'noon," "yes'day," "becuz," "git," "p'lice"—*ad infinitum*. Only yesterday I asked a class, who had been watching details of speech, what they had heard. Only one little Petina made answer: "Yesterday you said 'wuz'!"

Besides seeing it in the spoken word the boy must learn to appreciate detail in the written thought. Can he write a respectable letter of any kind? See first whether he can learn at home. For proof to the contrary we have only to turn to that desk drawer where we all keep those pathetically amusing excuse-notes from Peter's mother. Illiterate, besmudged, without beginning or end—he can learn nothing from them.

But then there is that commercial English which I have mentioned before. The trouble with it is that it *is* commercial English, not English for commercials. It teaches heading, salutation, complimentary close, and all the rules for punctuation. Peter can invariably repeat all those rules verbatim, but when it comes to applying them to his own letters he collapses. And yet when he is in an office he will never be asked to repeat a rule; but he will be told to "answer this letter in the usual way." As the business letter is so important a source of his income, we have taught him nothing unless he has learned to *apply* the principles given in commercial English.

In fact, in any form of writing Peter is helpless without us. All his themes are shapeless, empty pods of sentences, in quantity laboriously conforming to our thoughtless demand for a "three-page theme." Peter has no sense of construction; his writings reflect his formless background. He will tell us glibly, of course, that a paragraph has a topic sentence, a development, and a conclusion. But can he analyze a paragraph into its parts, or build a good one for himself? He jabbers theories, but he can never handle the practical details of paragraph-construction.

The same thing is true of longer papers. The boy learns out of textbooks what ought to be done, but he has an almost super-human struggle to do it. The details of longer papers, in this instance, I take to mean their plans, the parts which show how they are built. Until *we* make Peter see how carefully plans are used in nature, in all man does, he cannot plan, because his background has been so haphazard that he has never learned how.

In teaching the lad how to plan such connected discourses as he may need to use in his business life, we must supply his second great need—mental independence. I have spoken of his attitude when he first enters the high school, of his timid monosyllables, of his stutterings over a complete sentence. If he is to be of any value in the world, this pathetic dumbness must be cured.

The first way to teach Peter to be mentally independent is to require him to be physically so when he recites. Our grammar schools usually work hard at this, with the result that when the

boy first enters high school he is usually able to get along without leaning all over every desk he sees. As he begins to grow tall, however, he lops and lolls, and ties one leg round the other, as he recites, until we wonder that he is not permanently deformed. The worst of that physical slump is that it is bound to mean a mental slump too. Certainly the first thing to do with the lad is to make him stand up straight when he talks.

The second thing is to make Peter realize that he has ideas. I think that in this question we teachers need to criticize ourselves. Do we treat with respect our pupils' floundering attempts to think, or have we so made up our minds what we want for answers that we are not very considerate of childish points of view? A pupil once rushed up to me, flushed and reproachful, saying, "You told us we had a right to our opinion and nobody agreed with Miss — today, and we all said so, and the whole class got a terrible laying out." The worst of it is that the boy has spent a large part of his life in being still so as to avoid "a terrible laying out." In his tired household unobtrusive silence will keep his father's heavy hand from falling on him, so he has never expressed his little opinions. Furthermore, he believes firmly that agreeing with the teacher will give him a good mark. We have got to teach him somehow that only through independent thinking has the world grown. We must hear his opinions, and not mind if they are very young ones; only growing up can cure that.

The third thing to be done to develop Peter's mental independence is to teach him how to broaden his own ideas. We all know how he uses books of reference, copying pages laboriously word for word, without assimilating a single thought in one of them. His ignorance, also, of the public library is abysmal, and he is mortally afraid of falling into the abyss. One of our earliest duties is to show him how to use a reference book, to teach him that a library is a resource to be relied upon, not an institution to be shunned. In fact, the boy can do no more valuable single piece of work than to find for himself what books are in a library on a given subject in which his interest has been aroused. He should learn step by step to use books of reference to prove the ideas in which he believes.

The final thing which will help Peter to gain the practical mental independence he must have is practice in speaking his mind. With this in view, there should be much classroom conversation. It doesn't make any difference whether or not it is about the subject on page 63 of the textbook. There is a pedagogic theory that a teacher should not talk very much. But in working with Peter, I believe it is poor teaching not to talk. Reflect that we may be absolutely the only persons of education with whom he comes in contact; our pronunciations are the only cultured ones he ever hears; our ideas the only broadened ones he ever listens to. It puts a tremendous responsibility upon us, but makes the necessity none the less for talking ourselves and letting Peter talk.

Besides the classroom conversations there are the regular oral themes, debates, and readings which are invaluable. Of course, the boy thinks he is getting out of his English work in having them. We are likely to think so too and to neglect them, until we remember that our task is the development of mental independence and not the mere covering of pages 1-250 in a rhetoric. A class of Peters once asked permission to have a mock trial in an English recitation. Consent was given only on condition that the trial should be carried on in proper fashion entirely without the teacher's guidance. Peter No. 27, who was repeating the course for the third time, and had never been known to utter more than two words at once, was ironically made court officer. During the trial, the opposing Celtic "lawyers" fell into a violent altercation, which threatened to become a fist fight. Instantly the dumb court officer leaped to his feet, calling sternly "Order in the court!" Then he read the amazed "lawyers" a good round lecture on behavior in the courtroom, ending with, "I'll put the one of yez out, if the two of yez don't behave." The judge said calmly, "The testimony will proceed," and it did! The strange part of it all is that that one independent act of the court officer so loosed his ideas that now he has to be ignored that others may have a chance.

So it is that from both cultural and practical points of view Peter's needs are greater than, and different from, those of the fortunate child. As I have written, I have had in mind the continual contrast between these two. Even though the parents of the

fortunate child neglect their opportunities, he has at least pictures on his walls, books in his bookcases, talk at his table. He hears about theaters and politics and people; he imitates correct language; he acquires an attitude toward knowledge with the very air he breathes. That is the child to whom we give our very best teaching, for whom we plan our schools. He is to be the leader.

But Peter has nothing, so we give him nothing. Small wonder he is such an arid little person, small wonder we do not enjoy teaching him. But, if we can once think out Peter's problem, is not the reward infinitely greater? For Peter needs us so much more than does that other child!